

# Rotherham Mosque Liaison Group

## Background

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council manages relationships with local mosques and madrassahs by a specifically developed Mosque Liaison Group (MLG). This also serves as a forum for engagement on a range of issues and as a foundation for work with the wider Muslim communities. This includes health, social care, education, cohesion, and community safety matters.

Since the formation of the MLG the relationship between the local mosques, madrassahs and partner agencies has matured and strengthened significantly. It has reached the point where there is joint action and delivery on areas of mutual concern.

The MLG was established in 2006 at a time of strained relations and initially served to provide a forum for discussion on community tensions.

## Summary

Until 2006, while there was relatively good engagement with voluntary and community groups, the mosques had not been involved in wider community activity. The trigger point was the approach taken by statutory agencies on a specific safeguarding case which, with hindsight, could have been managed much more effectively. Special meetings needed to be organised to bring together the key players in the sector to learn from the experience and one of the outcomes, agreed by all parties was the need for more regular dialogue and a mechanism for collective consultation with the local Muslim community. Additionally, it rapidly became clear that the means of engagement and ways of working would need to be adapted significantly in order to work with the mosques. The solution was seen to be a forum where mosque representatives and agencies could raise issues which needed consultation or action; this was the start of the Mosque Liaison Group.

## Who is involved?

The MLG is chaired by the local authority's cabinet member for communities and cohesion. It also has a representative from each mosque and madrassah in the borough (normally a committee member). Other representatives from partner agencies include:

- The director of children and young people services (CYPS) – overseeing educational achievement issues
- Senior police representative (superintendent or chief superintendent)
- The director of public health from NHS Rotherham (this function has now been moved to the council with the national health reforms)
- A senior manager from Children's Safeguarding Unit
- A representative of the local Hospital
- A representative of the fire and rescue service.

Other officers are brought in as required on specific issues. The group is serviced by officers from the council's Community Engagement team and from the Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance – an umbrella organisation for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups in the borough.

## The challenges for us

Unstructured approach to safeguarding issues – the Children's Safeguarding Unit worked with a sub-group of mosque representatives to develop safeguarding guidance and procedures which each mosque signed

up to along with the director and cabinet member for CYPS. This was followed up with safeguarding awareness training sessions open to Imams, committee members, teachers and volunteers at the mosques. Over 100 people have attended from all nine of the mosques and madrassahs. This was then followed up by targeted child protection officer (CPO) training with the aim of having at least one male and one female CPO-trained person in each mosque. Further training will follow. The biggest challenge in this area was inertia to address issues around safeguarding which was overcome by engaging an Imam who was also an Ofsted inspector and could bring together a range of perspectives and influence a change in approach.

Health and safety issues and fire risks due to large numbers of adults or children using facilities – the fire and rescue service gave assistance with risk assessments and inspections to ensure that facilities are up to standard.

Timely release of deceased body for burials and out-of-country removal authority from the Coroner – this has been an area of great concern to the Muslim community (in order to meet religious requirements burial needs to be completed as soon as possible) and it has been addressed by improved working arrangements with the hospital, and urgent out-of-hours services offered by the council-based Registrar of Deaths and the Coroner.

Engagement on Prevent and cohesion issues – The mosques have been involved in a wide range of work with young people and communities with support from the council and police including providing general messages on being vigilant against extremism including:

- support for vulnerable individuals
- mosques paying greater attention to the background of invited speakers at events
- Safe Spaces for professionals, older people and young people to address issues of concern
- raising aspirations of young people through looking at the history of Muslim culture and contributions to world development
- first aid training for teachers
- support for the development and signing of the Armed Forces Covenant
- the development of the Rotherham Council of Mosques as an independent body representing the needs of all the mosques and madrassahs in the borough.

Improvement of Health Services – Following feedback about poor treatment, mosque representatives were invited into the local hospital to view various aspects of medical care that were provided and have made recommendations on staff awareness of the needs of Muslim patients including:

- dealing with racist / Islamophobic attitudes of other patients
- quality and variety of food and procedural aspects which are being considered by the hospital.

A health educators project has been established to provide key health messages through champions from within the mosque congregation partnered by post-graduate students from the University of Sheffield.

Support to develop governance arrangements of individual mosques – the council worked with the Charity Commission to provide an overview of the responsibilities of charity trustees. Surgery sessions were also held to help review each organisation's governing document. The council's contract with a voluntary sector infrastructure body was amended on annual renewal to include capacity building support for mosques and madrassahs.

## **Outcomes**

The biggest difference is in the quality of relationship between local agencies and the mosques. There is greater trust and with the developing network of contacts it is now much easier to very quickly get direct access into various aspects of the mosque's work and have frank discussions. This would not have been possible before 2006.

The work on relationship building has helped us to engage the mosques and their users on a wide range of other issues such as:

- improving health services
- deciding budget priorities in a time of reducing funding
- addressing tensions in local communities
- improved safeguarding environments
- better governance and organisational stability.

The MLG has also provided a forum for individual services to access mosques and their communities and this has helped when ensuring that communities with the different protected characteristics under equalities legislation are effectively engaged.

## **What we learnt**

- Mosques are predominantly run by a volunteer management committee.
- A handful of committee members will be contributing 20-30 hours a week of voluntary time. They do this as well as having to support their own families. This is partially why some mosques are run by older people who are retired or semi-retired.
- While there may be a desire for them to engage in a wide range of links and partnership activity, they may not be able to do so due to capacity and human resources available to them.
- Management arrangements tend to be much more informal than a comparable income voluntary organisation and there is greater emphasis on trust between members.
- Some mosques may not be geared up to deal with administration and could benefit from additional support.
- There is still suspicion about working with public agencies particularly police and social services but this is being reduced by joint working approaches and regular contact.
- The mosques are a good way to target men and young people in the Muslim community and some mosques also have facilities for women: additional mechanisms may need to be put in place to engage Muslim women.
- An understanding of the dynamics of mosques and their operation; religious perspectives and their impact in wider society interactions; understanding of Muslim and ethnic Pakistani/Kashmiri/Arab cultures and ability to speak community languages have all been important aspects of helping the engagement process.
- Some mosques will provide supplementary education in the form of language or religious teaching as well as provide a facility for communal and solitary prayer. The larger mosques will have dedicated space/facilities for religious teaching by dedicated volunteers.

- It is important for local authority school services and learning communities to understand the nature of the supplementary education provided by the mosques and madrassah and, where possible, link Headteachers with the appropriate committee chair in their local mosque or madrassah.

Involvement in the inter-faith work – this has worked very well in the past, however, this has now slowed and needs renewed impetus. Part of the issue here seems to be competing priorities and mosque representatives concentrating on other operational aspects of keeping their organisations running effectively.

As part of the engagement, there is encouragement for the mosques to involve a more diverse range of people in the administration and management including young people, women and professionals with skills to address particular aspects of the organisation. This is a process of evolution not revolution and needs to progress at a pace with which the mosques are comfortable.

A leadership programme is being delivered in partnership with a local college to help develop new and existing volunteers who will continue to support the development of the mosques.

### **Contact**

Waheed Akhtar, Community Engagement Officer  
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council  
Email: [waheed.akhtar@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:waheed.akhtar@rotherham.gov.uk)

Janet Spurling, Community Engagement Officer  
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council  
Email: [janet.spurling@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:janet.spurling@rotherham.gov.uk)